



#StrathEstrangement



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ESTRANGED STUDENTS

IN HIGHER & FURTHER EDUCATION

BASED ON THE
RESEARCH
FUNDED BY THE
CARNEGIE
TRUST AND THE
SOCIETY FOR
RESEARCH IN
HIGHER
EDUCATION.



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THIS REPORT IS BASED ON
THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY
PROF. YVETTE TAYLOR
AND DR. CRISTINA COSTA
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Estrangement feels very taboo ; it's almost like having to out myself a lot of the time to people ; people are more familiar with the idea that your parents are divorced or have died or whatever (Jennifer, 31)

It's like a rope round you pulling you back as you're going forward, but I don't think it's a barrier that stops, I think it's a barrier that's just there and to be aware of. (Robert, 29)

Estranged students can be defined as a group of young adults who have unstable, minimal or no contact with their parents and/or their wider family networks. In the context of the Scotland, estrangement status among students was only recognized in 2016 through campaigning initiatives supported by Stand Alone and ButtleUK. To date, only ten Scottish Universities and Colleges have explicit policies in place to support this group as signatories to the Stand Alone Pledge.

Little is known about the experiences of estranged students either in the UK or internationally: based on interviews (n=23), this study represents the first of its kind in Scotland, exploring how estranged students navigate Education structures and the

institutional and interpersonal resources available. It offers an examination of estranged students' further and higher education experiences, identities and expectations, how these are supported and managed and what educational and employment aspirations are fostered and developed. While it is clear that steps have been made in helping education institutions identify and support estranged students, often estranged students do not fit pre-existing widening participation policies or funding categories (e.g. Bland 2018; UCAS 2017); discretion, care and flexibility are needed.

Students become estranged from their families for a number of reasons, including emotional and physical abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. In addition, estrangement can also relate to 'divorce, honour-based violence, forced marriage, and family rejection of LGBTQI+ students' (Blake, 2015).

Research Findings

– Definitions of estrangement are restrictive and inflexible, offering little understanding or appreciation of the complexity of estrangement experiences and practices and hardships: the Office for Students limits the status of estrangement in higher education to students between 18 and 24 years old and stipulates that estrangement means no communicative relationship with either living biological parent (2018), a definition also shared by the Student Loans Company (2016). It can be very

difficult to 'prove' the status of estrangement under such restrictive conditions.

- Definitions of estrangement shape the identities and realities of those who are formally associated with it and who can become, or fear becoming, victims of scrutinisation and unfair surveillance strategies, justified in the name of anti-fraud detection. Often monitoring approaches do not take into account the specificities, vulnerabilities or characteristics of estranged students (Bland 2018).

- Estrangement does not cease or become irrelevant when a student reaches the age of 25. Even when young people leave the family home it 'continues to be the site through which many of their individual biographies and expectations are routed' beyond the tidy age of 25 (Valentine et al. 2003: 481). This signals the complexity in defining 'youth' and the significance of this (expanding) point in the life-course of an individual, especially when they may lack the social and economic support that they are assumed to receive via family.



– Although well intentioned, supporting structures only cater partially for the needs of estranged students who are often considered from the perspective and experience of traditional students, with ‘add-on’ support recognising additional financial hardships. The intersection of financial, social and emotional needs still has to be taken into account.

– There are enduring similarities in the experiences of estranged students, with many reporting e.g. experiences of homelessness, severe financial hardship, mental health issues, disrupted study, etc. Experiences of estrangement can lead a strong sense of difference and exclusion within further and higher education contexts. As Colleges and Universities claim readiness to welcome a diverse student body, there is a need to acknowledge the complexity of students’ lives, encompassing an approach inclusive of those do not fit within a regular or expected pattern of what it means to be a student.

– While there are group commonalities, little is known about the differences in estranged students’ experiences, in terms of e.g. race, class, gender and sexuality, a knowledge gap that requires research attention. Students’ struggles need to be accounted for intersectionally rather than through a tick box exercise of widening participation/diversity agendas to which institutions sign up. The Stand Alone Pledge has to be agreed, actively implemented and monitored.

– Inclusion of estranged students in academia does not stop at entry point; to measure entry as success would be to ignore the challenges students bring and carry with them throughout their studies, and indeed beyond. Positioning students as ‘non-traditional’ can encourage a deficit perspective (and labelling students as ‘disadvantaged’ may strengthen stereotypes rather than contest them). This ‘othering’ of students from non-traditional backgrounds may well foster a sense of difference, with institutional variations in student integration.

– It is important to consider students’ own definitions, as well as resistances and personal strength evident in all interviews. Often students face isolation, uncertainty, financial instability and experience or fear of homelessness, and yet have still secured a place at College or University using whatever limited resources, personal and practical, to navigate barriers to their academic success.

– Family estrangement is often regarded as a form of deviance and interference in relation to both unquestioned assumptions and the cultural imagination that ‘a family is forever’ (Sharp 2017). This is problematic in that such approach casts estrangement as an anomaly that requires fixing, where family estrangement is becoming a more prevalent reality in modern society (Conti 2015).

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OFTEN STUDENTS FACE ISOLATION, UNCERTAINTY, FINANCIAL INSTABILITY AND EXPERIENCE OR FEAR OF HOMELESSNESS, AND YET HAVE STILL SECURED A PLACE AT COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY USING WHATEVER LIMITED RESOURCES, PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL, TO NAVIGATE BARRIERS TO THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

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CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

FINANCE

ACCOMODATION

**IMPACT ON
BELONGING**

STIGMATISATION

LACK OF FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT



YOU NEED TO RELY ON YOURSELF.
YOU DON'T HAVE REALLY TOO MUCH
SUPPORT FROM ANYBODY .
(MARTIN, 22)

IF I CAN'T COVER RENT OR I
CAN'T AFFORD FOOD. I DON'T HAVE
A SAFETY NET.
(NATHAN, 27)

BUT UM IT, I JUST, I THINK IT
PERMEATES SO DEEPLY THAT UM
THE EXPERIENCE IN TERMS OF,
AH AND FOR ME IT'S
PREDOMINANTLY ON THE FINANCIAL
SIDE (EXPLAINS SUMMER SCHOOL IN
CHINA AS EXAMPLE).
(KATE, 24)

MISSING OUT ON STUDENT LIFE

YEAH WHAT I DON'T ENJOY IS THAT I THINK THAT OTHER STUDENTS ARE AH ENJOYING AH THESE YEARS OF THEIR LIFE AND I'M NOT ENJOYING THEM (SHORT LAUGH). I'M JUST LIKE GOING ON AND AH [PAUSE] I FEEL LIKE I'M WASTING, NOT WASTING TIME BECAUSE OBVIOUSLY I'M GOING TO HAVE A DEGREE, BUT [PAUSE] LIKE YEAH, LIKE, I DON'T KNOW, IT'S LIKE A DARK PERIOD AH THAT I HAVE TO GO THROUGH.
(EMMA, 24)



I DON'T HAVE TIME, LIKE FOR
EXAMPLE TO PARTY (...) I DON'T HAVE
TOO MUCH TIME FOR A SOCIAL LIFE
DEFINITELY
(MARTIN, 22)

BUT IT'S A LOT OF LIKE AH WORRYING
[FOOD, RENT]. SO I THINK IT TAKES
AWAY FROM MY EXPERIENCE
OBVIOUSLY
(EMMA, 24)

I GUESS IT MAKES ME MORE
INDEPENDENT , BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE I
NEED TO BE REALLY CONCERNED ABOUT
WHAT DO I DO WITH MY TIME.
(DIANE, 23)

LABEL

ESTRANGEMENT FEELS VERY TABOO...
IT'S ALMOST LIKE HAVING TO OUT
MYSELF A LOT OF THE TIME TO PEOPLE...
PEOPLE ARE MORE FAMILIAR WITH
THE IDEA THAT YOUR PARENTS ARE
DIVORCED OR HAVE DIED OR WHATEVER
(NATHAN, 27)

I DON'T REALLY LIKE TO TITLE
MYSELF ESTRANGED THAT MUCH... IT'S
STIGMATISING (...) LIKE NO MATTER
WHAT BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO ME,
YOU KNOW, IT'S LIKE A VERY BAD
BEGINNING, BAD UPBRINGING, OR
EVERYTHING, A LOT OF BAD LUCK, BUT



I'M COMING THROUGH IT
(DYLAN, 28)

I'D SAY IT'S ONLY HELPFUL IF WE
WOULD GET LIKE FINANCIAL
SUPPORT
(JOHN, 26)

IT [ESTRANGEMENT] SEEMS NEGATIVE
THAT YOU'RE EITHER CUT OFF OR CUT
YOURSELF OFF FROM YOUR FAMILY,
AND NORMALLY THAT COMES WITH THE
ATTACHMENT OF "WHAT HAVE THEY
DONE WRONG FOR THAT TO HAPPEN"
(ROBERT, 29)



ACCOMODATION

THEY CAN OFFER YOU SOME
ACCOMMODATION BUT I DON'T
KNOW, AT THE UNIVERSITY WOULD
COST LIKE, I DON'T KNOW, FIVE OR
SIX HUNDRED PER MONTH. SO IT'S
NOT REALLY A HELP.
(MARTIN, 22)

[HELP] FINDING AFFORDABLE
ACCOMMODATION
(JOHN, 26)



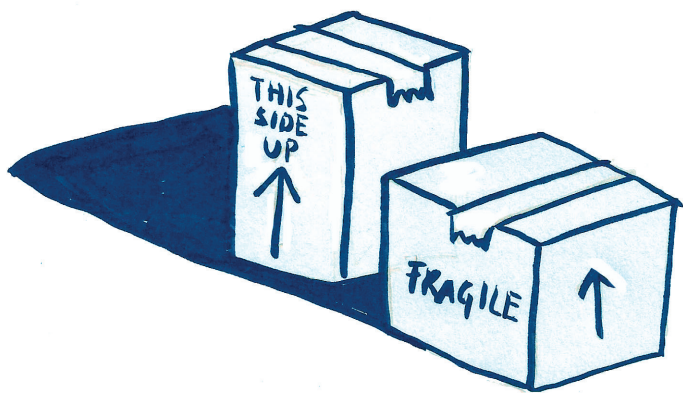
LIKE UNIVERSITY HALLS ARE
VERY, VERY EXPENSIVE, SO AGAIN
LIKE THERE WAS NO WAY I REALLY
WOULD'VE BEEN ABLE TO AFFORD
LIVING ALL THREE YEARS IN
UNIVERSITY HALLS.
(DYLAN, 28) *



EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

SO WHEN I CAME TO THE END OF FIRST YEAR UM WE HAD A WEE SITUATION WHERE I WAS, I WAS LIVING IN HALLS AND, AND THE UNIVERSITY WERE SAYING 'WELL YOU NEED TO VACATE UM THE HALLS ON THIS DATE', AND I SAID 'WELL I DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE ELSE TO GO UM AND I DON'T HAVE A JOB'. AND MY STUDENT LOAN'S ENDING. SO I WAS ENTIRELY UNPREPARED FOR THAT... AH AND AS A RESULT I ACTUALLY REMEMBER I MOVED ALL MY STUFF OUT OF THE, OUT OF THE HALLS ONTO THE GRASS OUTSIDE THE, THE BUILDING... I HAVE A FRIEND

WHO IS FROM AH LIVINGSTONE AND
HE PACKED UP MY STUFF. ANOTHER
FRIEND SAID 'YOU CAN KEEP YOUR
STUFF IN MY HOUSE', AND FOR THAT
WHOLE SUMMER I ENDED UP BEING
HOMELESS (...) I FELT THAT AT THAT
POINT THE SUPPORT STRUCTURES WERE
NOT UM ASSISTING PEOPLE THAT WERE
IN MY, IN MY SHOES BASICALLY
(KATE, 24)



FEAR OF HOMELESSNESS





I MISSED RENT QUITE A FEW TIMES
AND I GOT LIKE A BAD REFERENCE
FROM MY LANDLORD (...) BECAUSE
THERE WAS NO SAFETY NET (...) AND
I'LL STILL, EVEN THOUGH NOW THAT
I'M SETTLED AND I'M MARRIED I WILL
SOMETIMES THINK, I'M ONLY SO
MANY STEPS AWAY FROM, IT SOUNDS
DRAMATIC BUT ONLY SO MANY STEPS
AWAY FROM HOMELESSNESS OR ONLY
SO MANY STEPS (SHORT LAUGH) AWAY
FROM UM DESTITUTION
(NATHAN, 27)

EXPECTATIONS OF COMING TO UNIVERSITY

AH TO GET A NEW LIFE
(JOHN 26)

I HAD EXPECTATIONS THAT IT WAS
GOING TO BE DIFFICULT. I REALLY DID
THINK IT WAS GOING TO BE AMAZING
AND IT HAS BEEN THAT. ... YOU JUST
MEET SO MANY DIFFERENT
PEOPLE IN YOUR SUBJECTS. ... LEARN
THINGS THAT YOU'D NEVER LEARNED
BEFORE KIND OF THING
(NATHAN 27)

SHAME

UM AND I THINK NEGOTIATING THOSE
FEELINGS OF SHAME ARE ALSO VERY
TIRING, BECAUSE IT MEANS THAT
YOU'RE VERY SECRETIVE AND UM,
YOU KNOW WHEN YOU LIVE IN A BIG
SHARED HOUSE AND EVERYONE'S
PARENTS PHONE THEM LIKE A FEW
TIMES A WEEK OR SOMETHING IT
BECOMES, IT'S A VERY OBVIOUS
ABSENCE, THAT NO ONE'S
PHONING ME
(LOUISE 29)

SUMMER GRANTS

'...INTRODUCED A CARE EXPERIENCED
SUMMER GRANT...'

'... TRADITIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES
ARE NOT APPLICABLE...'

(KATE, 24)



DURING THE SUMMER FOR ME IT'S A REALLY DIFFICULT TIME, (...) I WOULD LIKE TO BE ABLE TO COVER THE SUMMER WHEN I DON'T HAVE SAAS AND THINGS LIKE THAT. SO IF THERE WAS MAYBE LIKE MORE SUPPORT IN PLACE FOR STUDENTS WHO OBVIOUSLY AREN'T GETTING SAAS DURING THE SUMMER.

(ERICA, 24)

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS



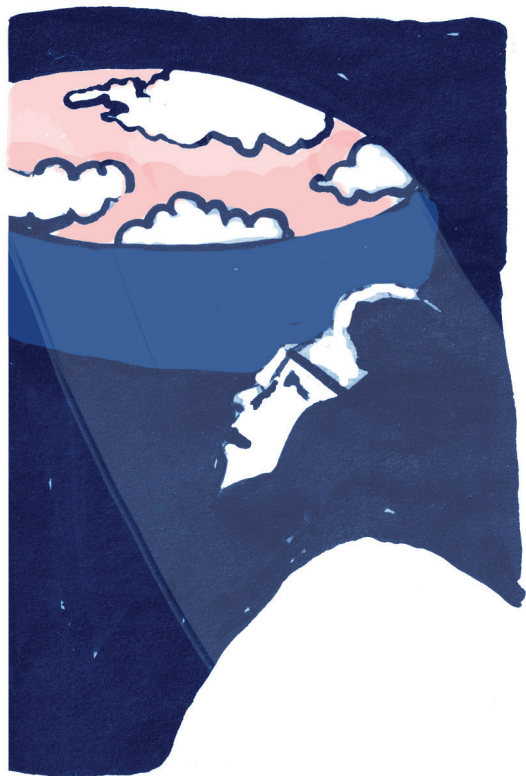
I FELT VERY ISOLATED AS AN
ESTRANGED PERSON. I'D NEVER MET
ANYONE ELSE WHO WAS ESTRANGED
FROM THEIR FAMILIES
(NATHAN, 27)

[FEELING ISOLATED/LONELY] IT
DEFINITELY COMES UP A LOT MORE
THAN I'D EXPECT IT TO. BECAUSE
LIKE ESPECIALLY LIKE WHEN I WAS
WORKING FOR FOUR YEARS IT'S LIKE
IT JUST NEVER COMES UP. YOU KNOW,
IT'S, YOU WORK, YOU MAKE FRIENDS,
THAT'S IT. BUT WITH UNIVERSITY,
ESPECIALLY WITH LIKE WHEN PEOPLE
GO HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS
(DYLAN, 28)

RESILIENCE

I JUST GET USED TO, YOU KNOW, LIFE IS LIKE THIS, IN MY CASE ... I MEAN I DON'T PAY TOO MUCH ATTENTION TO THAT [LABEL OF ESTRANGEMENT] (...) IT'S NO TIME TO CRY OVER YOURSELF. (MARTIN, 22)

I THINK THE TERMINOLOGY ESTRANGED, IT, IT DOES, IT SEEMS TO HAVE A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION TO ME. (...) UM I ALWAYS PREFER THE TERM INDEPENDENT STUDENT (KATE 24)



I DON'T THINK IT'S PART OF LIKE, OF
MY IDENTITY. IT'S JUST LIKE A THING
THAT HAPPENED.
(EMMA, 24)

I'M NOT REALLY
SPENDING
MY TIME BEING
SAD OR
DEPRESSED
(DIANE, 23)

I DON'T THINK IT'S ESTRANGED.
BECAUSE I'M USED TO IT. I'VE
BEEN LIVING HERE FOR LIKE OVER
SIX YEARS NOW
(ANNA, 32)

FOR MYSELF PERSONALLY [THE LABEL]
I DON'T MIND IT. I DON'T KNOW
WHETHER OTHERS MIGHT THINK OF

IT AS LIKE A SENSITIVE SUBJECT,
BUT FOR ME IT'S JUST, JUST THE
WAY MY LIFE IS
(ERICA, 24)

IT'S [THE LABEL OF ESTRANGEMENT]
NOT GOING TO DEFINE ME FOREVER.
IT'S GOING TO DEFINE ME FOR
ANOTHER THREE YEARS, AND THEN
AH IF I GET A ... IF I WANT TO DO
A PHD IT'S GOING TO BE PAID. IF
I FIND A JOB I'M GOING TO BE
FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT.
I AM ALREADY FINANCIALLY
INDEPENDENT, BUT I'M GOING
TO COPE BETTER.
(MARTIN, 22)



INDEPENDENCE

I HAD TO DO EVERYTHING, LIKE
LITERALLY, BECAUSE ALSO I'M
INDEPENDENT STUDENT
(ANNA 32)

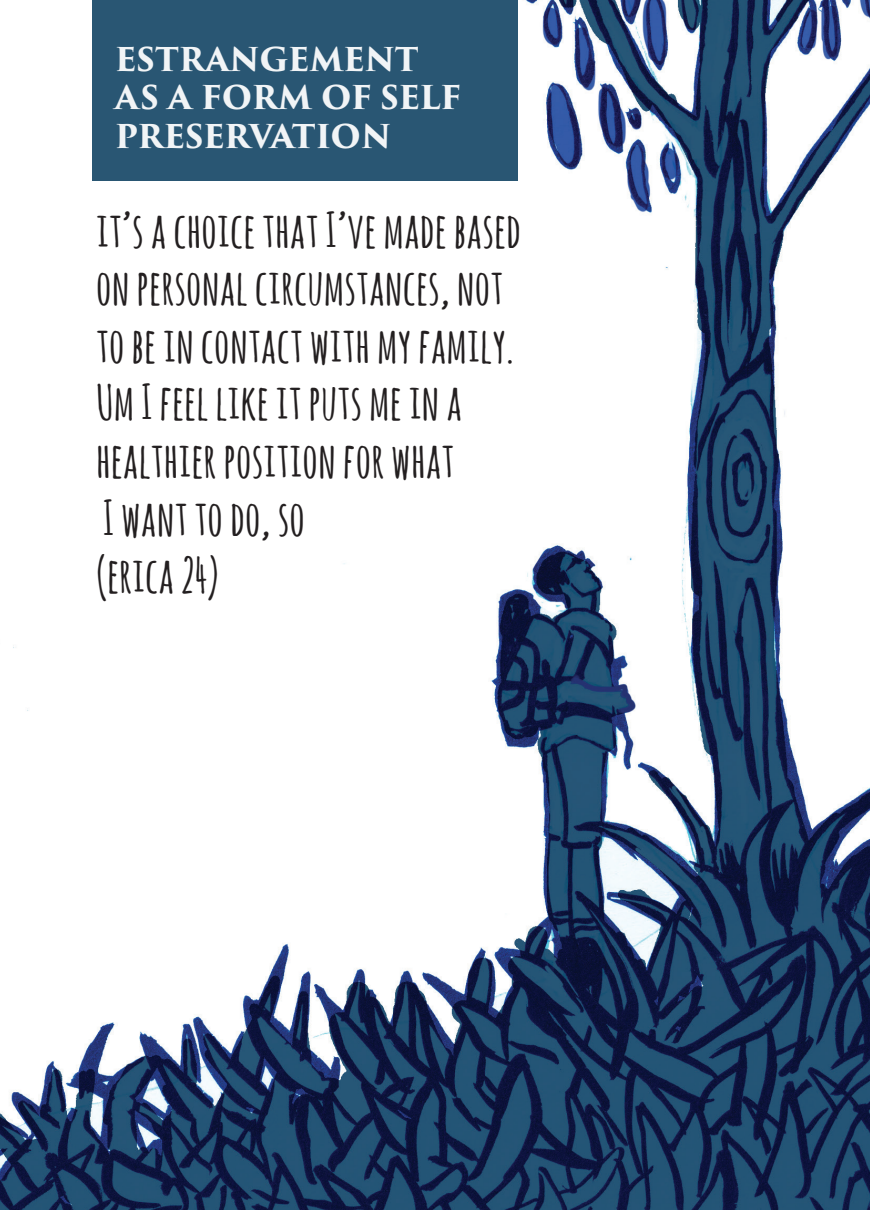


UM I WOULD SAY FOR MYSELF, BECAUSE
I THINK OF MYSELF MORE AS LIKE AN
INDEPENDENT PERSON, AND I THINK
BEING AN ESTRANGED STUDENT I'M
LIKE QUITE PROUD OF THE FACT THAT
I'VE STILL COME BACK TO UNIVERSITY
BUT I HAVE THIS TITLE. UM BUT I
DON'T THINK IT'S KIND OF (....)
MY ONLY IDENTITY
(ERICA 24)

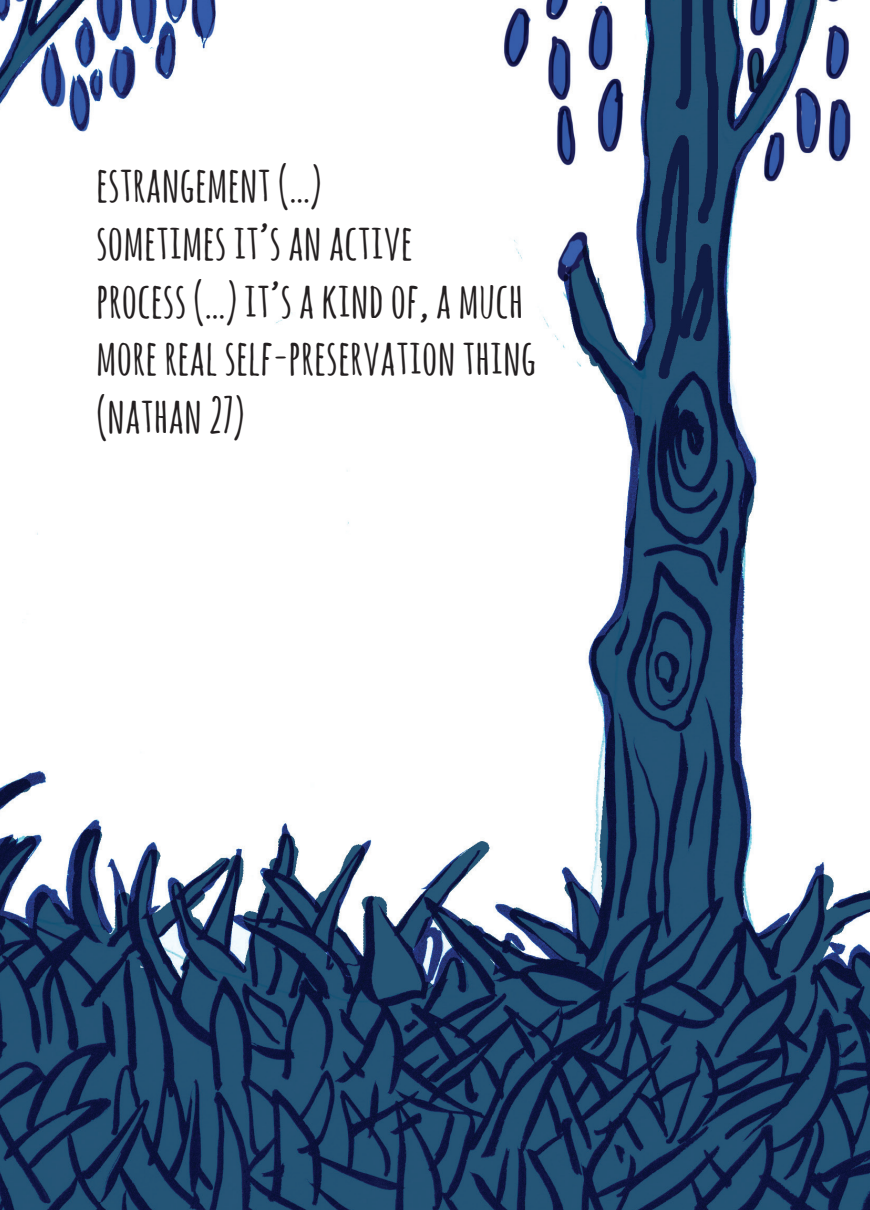
I THINK THE TERMINOLOGY
ESTRANGED, IT, IT DOES, IT SEEMS
TO HAVE A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION
TO ME. (...) UM I ALWAYS PREFER THE
TERM INDEPENDENT STUDENT
(KATE 24)

ESTRANGEMENT AS A FORM OF SELF PRESERVATION

IT'S A CHOICE THAT I'VE MADE BASED
ON PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, NOT
TO BE IN CONTACT WITH MY FAMILY.
UM I FEEL LIKE IT PUTS ME IN A
HEALTHIER POSITION FOR WHAT
I WANT TO DO, SO
(ERICA 24)



ESTRANGEMENT (...)
SOMETIMES IT'S AN ACTIVE
PROCESS (...) IT'S A KIND OF, A MUCH
MORE REAL SELF-PRESERVATION THING
(NATHAN 27)



TYPE OF SUPPORT NEEDED

SOME SORT OF SUPPORT, JUST
INFORMATION-WISE, FOR SOMEONE
WHO HAS TO RUN THEIR OWN
HOUSEHOLD AND HAS TO MANAGE ALL
OF THAT ON TOP OF HAVING
TO MANAGE KIND OF
COURSEWORK AND THINGS.
(ERICA 24)



LIKE MANAGING YOUR OWN MONEY
AND COOKING (...) BASIC
LIVING SKILLS AND STUFF LIKE
THAT YOU MAYBE DIDN'T
GET FROM HOME
(JENNIFER 31)



PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Estrangement has become recognised in higher and further education, with explicit policies and guidelines for widening participation teams and funding bodies. Yet, such policies - and their application to practice - often lack a deep understanding of the day-to-day struggles of estranged students. As reported by research participants, these struggles are not just economic or social, but are struggles anchored in a multitude of factors that lead to interrelated adversities but also resistances.

REFERENCES

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